

Circumstances • Philemon 1:1

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *"I Would Have Been With You."*

1. There once was a chief of a small tribe in Africa who had a close friend with whom he had grown up.
2. Their friendship carried on into their adult years and even when the chief became leader of the tribe they were found doing most things together.
3. The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that occurred as something positive.
4. No matter what happened he would say, "This is good!"
5. One day the two of them went on a hunt.
 - a. the friend loaded the new gun the chief had just receive as a gift, and then the chief would fire it
 - b. but the friend apparently loaded it incorrectly and the chief's thumb was blown off.
6. The friend remarked as usual, "This is good!" To which the chief replied, "No, this is NOT good!" and sent his friend to jail.
7. About a year later, the chief was again hunting, but this time in an area that he should have known to stay clear of.
 - a. a neighboring tribe of cannibals lived there and captured him
 - b. they took him to their village, stacked some wood, and began to make ready for a feast.
 - c. but when they went to tie his hands, they discovered the missing thumb
 - d. they were superstitious of the missing member, believing it made the victim unlucky to eat – so they released him
8. On the way back to his village, the chief was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for the way he'd treated his friend.
9. He immediately went to the jail and said to him, "You were right; it was good that my thumb was blown off. I am so sorry for sending you to jail for so long. It was bad for me to do this."
10. But his friend replied - "No; this too was good!"
11. The chief was surprised at the lack of bitterness in his friend and asked, "What do you mean, 'this is good'? How could it be

good that I sent you to jail for a year?"

12. The friend answered, "If I had NOT been in jail, I would have been *with* you."

B. Paul's Perspective

1. We see this kind of perspective in the our text this morning
2. The Apostle Paul had learned to look at life, not from the perspective of the moment but from the light of eternity.
3. Look at verse 1 . . .

II. TEXT

A. V. 1

**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother,
To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer,**

1. Really, it's just that first phrase I want to concentrate on this morning –

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus

2. A prisoner of who? Christ Jesus

B. Background

1. This is Paul's shortest and most personal letter
2. It was written to a man named Philemon who was a wealthy man living in the city of Colossae, a suburb of the busy metropolis of Ephesus.
3. Philemon was a believer and the church in Colossae used his home for meetings
4. Being a wealthy estate owner, he had slaves, and one of them was named Onesimus
5. While the details are a bit sketchy, it seems Onesimus had stolen some money from his master Philemon and then taken off to Rome – hoping he could get lost in the masses that filled the streets of that massive city
6. But there in Rome, Onesimus had run in to Paul and been led to faith in Christ.
7. Paul was in Rome under *house arrest*.
 - a. the Romans didn't consider him a flight risk so -

- b. he lived in his own rented house and had quite a bit of freedom, just so long as he didn't leave the city till his case was heard
 - c. this is what irked Paul – he itched to continue on in his missionary endeavors, but his freedom was limited and he knew himself to be a prisoner of the Roman legal system
8. Onesimus was one of those who attended Paul and ran errands for him
- a. Paul disciplined him and found the young man to be of tremendous help
 - b. but there was a major obstacle to be overcome – a bit of restitution Onesimus had to attend to – he had to make things right with Philemon, his master.
 - c. so Paul writes to Philemon with the news of Onesimus' conversion and asks that Philemon treat him with mercy as a brother in the faith.
 - d. Onesimus would then carry this letter back to Philemon.

C. A Prisoner of Christ Jesus

1. What I want to focus on this morning is the *remarkable* way Paul refers to himself here
2. In his other letters he refers to himself as an “apostle of the Lord.”
3. In some he calls himself the “servant” of Jesus.
4. But here, he's a prisoner
 - a. and a prisoner, not of Rome, but of who?
 - b. Christ Jesus
5. To outward appearances, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman legal system.
 - a. he'd been arrested by Roman troops in the temple in Jerusalem
 - b. he'd stood trial before 2 Roman governors and then appealed his case to the emperor
 - c. now he's in Rome, awaiting trial --
 - d. so we would expect Paul to identify himself as a prisoner of *Rome*, but he doesn't.
 - e. he's the prisoner of Christ Jesus because he sees where he is and what he is doing as directed by the Lord.
 - f. he's under house arrest because of one thing – faithfulness to his commission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ!
 - g. if in the execution of that mission he finds himself in Rome

under confinement – then it’s all part of what God has ordained for him.

6. Make no mistake, if Paul *had had it his own way*, he’d have been loose and traveling once again to some far distant shore to preach the gospel in unreached lands.
7. But long before he’d learned that *his* plans and God’s plans did not always run in unison and it was far better to rest in God’s design for his life.

D. Examples

1. Consider some of the other events in Paul’s life that reflect his absolute trust in God to direct his circumstances
2. In *Philippi*, Paul and Silas were beaten with rods and thrown into prison for preaching the gospel
 - a. that night, with their feet fastened to stocks and their backs sore and bleeding,
 - b. instead of lamenting their condition and demanding to know why God had forsaken them,
 - c. they held an afterglow and began singing songs of praise and thanksgiving for being counted worthy to suffer for Christ.
 - d. when an earthquake shook off their chains and opened the prison doors, instead of immediately running away, they used the opportunity to lead the jailor to Christ.

 - e. if most of us found ourselves in jail for preaching the gospel, we’d feel God had betrayed us
 - f. but Paul didn’t see it that way – *he* saw prisoners and a jailor who needed Jesus.
3. In *Lystra*, Paul was stoned and left for dead.
 - a. but when God rose him from the dead, instead of calling down fire from heaven to consume those who had dared to touch one of God’s anointed –
 - b. he went back in to the city and used the miracle of his healing as the means of strengthening the small group of believers who had been won to faith there.

 - c. okay – you go on a missions trip to the Philippines and go out into the streets to share the Lord with people and a small crowd gathers
 - d. after listening to you for a while, they grow irate that you

- would dare to speak against their religion and they pull out clubs and come after you
- e. they beat you to death and run off
 - f. the other members of your mission team stand around and weep, but God raises you from the dead
 - g. as you stand there, covered with the evidence of the beating, but full of life and strength, you begin to think about what's just happened to you and what it means
 - 1) you are the approved servant of the Lord!
 - 2) you stand vindicated as God's own messenger!
 - 3) now, you know what you would do – you'd puff out your chest and think about ways to go after that mob and bully them
 - 4) you'd play with the temptation to use your newfound status as a living miracle to ask God to go get your persecutors.
 - h. Paul didn't see it that way – he saw the miracle as the means of *helping*, not *hurting* others.
4. What of Paul's thorn in the flesh?
- a. in 2 Corinthians 12, he tells us he had some kind of physical infirmity that deeply troubled him
 - b. three times he plead with the Lord to take it from him because he believed it hindered his effectiveness for the Kingdom of God
 - c. but finally the Lord said to him, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”**
 - d. Paul came to rest in the wisdom of God and realized he was NOT healed because the presence of the weakness kept him dependent on the Lord.
 - e. he arrived at this conclusion; **“Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**
5. Paul didn't just pen the words of Romans 8:28 – He lived them.

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

6. Philemon 1:1 is Paul's *personal* application of that truth

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus

- a. not a prisoner of Rome
- b. a prisoner of Christ Jesus!
7. He believed that God was God of the circumstances of his life – every one of them!
8. He had come to know that God is not just Lord of the big things – He is also Lord of the details
9. It was no mistake that he was sent to prison in Philippi
 - a. it was no fluke that the stones flew at Lystra
 - b. it was no catastrophe when the riot broke out in Ephesus or in the temple in Jerusalem
 - c. it was no oversight on God's part when Paul was stricken with his thorn in the flesh
 - d. on the contrary, it was all a part of God's master plan to work in Paul and make him in to the man God needed to stand as a bold witness before the Gentile world
10. Paul *lived* what he preached – and all things worked together for good.

E. For Us

1. What Paul learned and lived you & I must learn and live - God is Lord of the circumstances of our lives
2. If you are one of His, then He is Lord – not just of the big things, but of the details.
3. And just as Paul could look at his present state there in Rome and say, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus" – you and I must look at our circumstances today and say, "I am a *whatever* of Christ Jesus."
 - a. a husband, a wife *of* Jesus Christ –
 - b. not in the terms of being wed TO Him, but that your marriage and your role in marriage is *OF* Him, assigned by Him to you
4. We've been deluged with calls and news about troubled marriages in our fellowship lately.
 - a. over the years, we've seen that this seems to be cyclical
 - b. we'll go for a couple years and things will be rather calm, then all of a sudden, there's a season of marital turmoil
 - c. we're in such a season right now

- d. if your marriage is one of those that's going through a tough time, please listen carefully
- 5. Just as Paul's being a prisoner was not an easy thing to bear, he'd come to realize it was *part of God's will* for him and he stopped resisting and instead embraced what God was doing.
 - a. in Philippi, his imprisonment had been for the salvation of the other prisoners and the jailor
 - b. his thorn in the flesh was for his own blessing and spiritual growth, learning to trust in the Lord's strength rather than his own
- 6. God intends your marriage to be the place of blessing and the trials you are now enduring are a part of that!
 - a. God wants you to learn unconditional love – His kind of love, toward your mate
 - b. you've been so fixed on what your husband or wife's been doing but it's NOT ABOUT THEM!
 - c. what is God trying to teach YOU?
 - d. Paul was a prisoner, and maybe you feel *trapped* in your circumstances
 - e. who did Paul see himself as a prisoner FOR? Jesus!
 - f. in the same way, you're a husband or a wife FOR Jesus!
 - g. stop looking at the failure of your mate and realize God wants to change YOU!
 - 1) make you more loving - more patient
 - 2) more like Him who lovingly and tenderly endures *us*!
- 7. Rarely is just one partner in a marriage to blame for the problems – but even if that were the case, the other is called to bear it for Christ, and by so doing, entering in to the very sufferings of Christ.
- 8. Listen to Romans 8:28 again . . .

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

- 9. And what is that purpose? It's in the next verse . . .

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.

- 10. What the “all things” of your life are working together *for* are

to conform you to the image of Christ.

11. Would anyone here like to eat a cup of white flour?
 - a. how about a stick of butter?
 - b. a couple raw eggs anyone?
 - c. some baking soda
 - e. a bag of semi-sweet chocolate chips?
 - f. a tablespoon of salt?
 - g. all of these things in themselves aren't too terribly tasty, but mix them *all together* with some milk and a couple other ingredients and you have chocolate chip cookie dough.
12. Our circumstances are the flour, salt, and eggs of a marvelous recipe God is stirring in our lives
13. When we *yield faithfully* to His hand, as Paul did here, it's like sugar that's added to the mix to make it sweet.

F. Another Example

1. There's an OT example of this kind of *yieldedness* to the Lord that is even more remarkable
2. It's the story of Joseph
 - a. sold by his brothers into slavery – he refused to be bitter but sought to faithfully serve the Lord in his position as a slave
 - b. and as a result, he rose in prominence until he was the chief servant and head over all his master's business
 - c. falsely convicted of attempted rape, he was cast into prison
 - d. but again, he refused to be bitter and faithfully served the Lord in whatever came to hand
 - e. there in the prison he again rose in position and was put over all.
 - f. when forgotten by men who could easily have seen him released, he once more refused to grow bitter and daily fulfilled the humble duties set before him till the day came when he was summoned before Pharaoh and promoted to be second ruler in all of the mighty empire of Egypt.
 - g. some years later, when he had it in his power to easily exact revenge on the brothers who'd sold him in to slavery, he refused – choosing to bless them instead.
 - h. when he finally revealed his identity to them, they were terror stricken, thinking for sure he was going to have them all executed – after all, that's what **THEY** would have done if they

were in his place

- i. but he told them not to be afraid – what they had meant for evil, Joseph had come to realize was in fact turned by God for good!
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3. God is God of *your* circumstances just as He was God of Paul's & Joseph's

- a. do you feel trapped by your circumstances?
 - b. do you feel that life has dealt you a bad hand?
 - c. does the single life seem limiting and narrow? Count yourself as a single of Christ!
 - d. do you feel trapped as a parent? Count yourself as a parent of Christ!
 - e. do you feel trapped in your job? Reckon yourself the employee of Jesus!
 - f. are you anxious to throw off the yoke of being a student? Understand yourself as the student of Jesus Christ!
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4. The story is told of a man in China who raised horses for a living.

- a. when one of his prized stallions ran away, his friends gathered at his home to mourn his loss.
- b. after they had expressed their concern, the man raised this question: "How do I know whether what happened is bad or good?"
- c. a couple days later the runaway horse returned with several strays following close behind.
- d. the friends again came to his house -- this time to celebrate his good fortune.
- e. "But how do I know whether it's good or bad?" the man asked them.
- f. that afternoon one of the new horses kicked the owner's son and broke the young man's leg.
- g. the friends lamented but the man said, "How do I know if this is bad or good?"
- h. only a few days later, war broke out and the man's son was exempted from military service because of his broken leg.
- i. the friends again gathered -- but we'll stop the story there.
- j. you can easily see how it could go on and on.

4. This tale points out that from our limited human perspective, things that look bad often turn out for good – and if we are the

- children of God, we have the iron-clad guarantee, they will!
5. A Christian man lost his home and mill when a flood washed them away.
 - a. he was broken-hearted and discouraged as he stood surveying his loss.
 - b. just then he saw a glittering object that had been uncovered by the waters. It was a massive vein of gold!
 - c. the disaster he thought had made him a beggar had actually made him wealthy.

G. God Is GOD!

1. My message is a simple one this morning – we need to see God as GOD, as Master, as Lord!
2. The One who possessed the wisdom, knowledge, and skill to design your physical body with all it's complexity and marvelously detailed systems possesses the wisdom, knowledge, and skill to engineer the *circumstances* of your life to conform you into the image of Christ.
3. Did you really think your marriage was about *your happiness*?
4. No – it's about making you more like Christ
 - a. about learning how to love without conditions
 - b. about being merciful and gracious
 - c. about the cost of forgiveness
 - d. about loyalty and fidelity
5. God is far more concerned with making you HOLY than Happy!
6. Did you think your job was about earning a paycheck?
 - a. it's far more about learning patience and faithfulness
 - b. submission and authority
 - c. humility!
7. Did you think having children was so someone could do the dishes and yard work?
 - a. parenting is the process by which we enter into the heart of our heavenly Father
 - b. as we walk with our children through childhood, we become more aware of how God works in our own lives so we can become even more faithful and pliable in *His* hands.
8. And may I say, as this message goes out in tape and on the radio, it may be that it will be heard by some in jail or prison.

- a. more than likely, you're there because of your own foolish choices
- b. but now that YOU ARE THERE – as you turn your heart to God, He can USE you in that cell.
- c. are you consumed with seeking a way out or with seeking Him?
- d. the quickest way out is to seek Him and yielding to whatever lesson He is attempting to work in you.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *The Boll Weevil*

1. In the center of Main Street in Enterprise, Alabama, stands one of the strangest monuments in the world.
2. It's a memorial to an insect!
3. Handsomely carved in stone is the likeness of a boll weevil.
4. In early plantation days almost everyone in the area raised cotton.
5. But as the years rolled on, a serious pestilence infested the area in the form of a small beetle called the boll weevil that would ruin the crop.
6. George Washington Carver, along with several other scientists, worked feverishly to find a solution and when it was obvious that cotton was doomed, they looked for another crop to grow
7. They decided on raising *peanuts* and in time, cotton was forgotten in that region.
8. The farmers' profits from peanuts far exceeded what they had earned from their best cotton yield.
9. In the end, they realized that the destructive insect they had feared had actually triggered the research that brought them prosperity.

B. *Is God, GOD?*

1. Let me end with a simple question this morning – is God, GOD?
2. Is He YOUR God?
3. Doesn't that mean then that He is sovereign over the circumstances of your life?
4. Then is there any room for whining and complaining?
5. Realizing that God intends always and only to shape and mold you into the glorious image of His Son, is there any room for doubting or resistance to His work?

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6. A museum guide was fond of taking his tour groups into a darkened room and shining his little flashlight onto a tangled mass of string, color and apparent chaos
 - a. he'd ask the group, what do you think this is?
 - b. the answers were always the same – no one could figure it out
 - c. then he'd take them to the other side of the room and turn on the house lights.
 - d. there before them was an enormous and gorgeous tapestry
 - e. in the light of the flashlight all they saw was one tiny portion of the back
 - f. but now in the full light they could see a beautiful picture weaved by a master artist
 7. From our human earthbound perspective, all we see seems a chaotic mess
 8. But God stands in eternity and patiently weaves a glorious piece of art
 9. That's what you are friend – God's masterwork!
 10. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 2:10 – “We are His *workmanship*”
 11. If life and circumstances seem to be nothing more than a confusing mess, remember you're only seeing one tiny part with a weak little beam
 12. Entrust yourself to God – He knows what He's doing!